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ABSTRACT

The term "rhetoric" is the object of a tug-of-war mostly between the study of certain forms of classical discourse and current teachers of (mostly college) writing who want to find a prehistory for their and "our" discipline. Efforts to invent and preserve disciplines have caused scholars to overlook more general considerations of rhetoric. Rhetoric should be understood generously as the study of communication. To examine rhetoric where it has consequences, instructors should pay more notice to rhetoric in connection with the media, specifically encouraging students to see their own writing as a medium. Three questions should be discussed further: (1) How much instruction in "comp/rhet" is or should be in "reading the culture" as opposed to other aspects of practice?; (2) Does instructional time given to semiotics or other devices detract from that available for students to write?; and (3) Can the "student as blank slate" be gotten away from? The implicit knowledge of culture is the horizon within which students write and think, the boundary of the terrain instructors encourage them to explore. Keeping in mind the need for students to write their way into the sort of discourses they need for success in college and after, they should be encouraged to look seriously at the text which is their experience and understanding of culture, in classrooms and curricular studies. (CR)

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ED 419 234

Session Title: The Other Rhetoric: What Students Bring to the Classroom

Is There a Class In This Text? Rhetoric In/Of the Media

Gary Thompson

College Conference on Composition and Communication, 2 April 1998

My announced topic is "Is There a Class In This Text? Rhetoric In/Of the Media," framed within the session's topic, "The Other Rhetoric: What Students Bring to the Classroom." The short answer is they bring their textbooks and their texts--but this is more complicated than it seems. Looking back over these titles, I realized that what I had produced was another title with a slash.

I think the next paper I do will be something like "On the Rhetoric of the Slash." The slash seems to function as the postmodern replacement of the colon in titles. It is particularly well suited to postmodernism, as it indicates simultaneous identity/[and]difference between the terms it unites and divides. The slash requires readers to read the slashed phrase at least three times: once as alternatives, once as substitution, and once taking both roads at once (and that has made all the *différance*). Slashes are *read* but not read *aloud*--a convention I will violate here--and are therefore well suited to *écriture*. Not only is the slash an indispensable punctuation-mark/metaphor for any text leaning toward or drawing from the postmodern, but it also is useful for the ambiguous status of composition/rhetoric, or *compslashrhet*. That will be one thread in this talk.

I found the actual topic for my talk a little after the 4Cs deadline for titles, so that an alternative title announced from the podium would be something like "The 'Cultural Turn' in Compslashrhet." That turn, such as it is, is evoked by some of the key terms in the titles for this session or paper as announced in the CCCC program. "*The Other Rhetoric: What Students Bring*

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to the Classroom". Such a use of *other* ordinarily signifies marginalization--there's a mainstream and there are little eddies or backwaters, and those stagnant backwaters would be what we're looking at in today's session, in the interest of not leaving anything out. Much as the margin may be the place to be these days, I'm a little uncomfortable with the implications of the metaphor which links *other* to *what students bring to the classroom*. Our work depends almost entirely on what they bring, far from a marginal consideration.

My own paper's announced title, "Is There a Class In This Text? Rhetoric In/Of the Media," in addition to its slash, also holds some loaded terms. Speak the word *class*, and you will normally be understood as referring primarily to the room where *as teachers* we do our work, or to the body of students who regularly meet there. This conception of *our work* excludes such vital activities as holding one-on-one conferences, tutoring in writing centers, providing comments on papers, communicating through on-line instructional media, and so on. *The class*, then, should be amended to the room where we do our most *public* work. *Class* as a reference to social strata remains unvoiced until made explicit. *(Text* I'll come back to later.) As for *rhetoric*, the term is the object of a tug-of-war mostly between the study of certain forms of classical discourse and current teachers of (mostly college) writing who want to find a prehistory for their and our discipline. Part of my argument is that efforts to invent and preserve disciplines have caused us to overlook more general considerations of rhetoric. I would argue that rhetoric should be understood generously as the study of communication, embracing both of these and moving on into the public sphere. Given the scale of everything grouped together under the term *media*, their texts outweigh considerably in volume--and I would say cultural significance--the academic fields labeled rhetoric, even with its slashed partner-discipline composition attached. If we want to examine rhetoric where it has *consequences*, those of

us involved in the teaching of writing and the academic study of rhetoric should pay more notice to rhetoric in connection with media, specifically by encouraging students to see their own writing as a medium. (Certainly *media*, including *electronic media*, looks rather marginal if you examine the CCCC program.) Beyond these remarks, I don't think I'll be doing much directly with "rhetoric of media" in this talk, except to assert that media work rhetorically, even (or especially) entertainment media, and their rhetoric can and should inform our teaching of rhetoric as college writing.

I suppose this positions me somewhere close to James Berlin in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*--this counts for the obligatory James Berlin reference in any CCCC panel--for example at the conclusion of chapter five ("Social-Epistemic Rhetoric, Ideology, and English Studies").

> Our business must be to instruct students in signifying practices broadly conceived--to see not only the rhetoric of the college essay but also the rhetoric of the institution of schooling, of politics, and of the media, the hermeneutic not only of certain literary texts, but also the hermeneutic of film, TV and popular music (93).

Berlin's last book can be taken as marking the cultural turn in compslashrhet. Those writing teachers who are engaged in this turn, having decided, for the most part, to move on from one or more of several previous models of writing instruction--teaching writing as drilling students in correct usage, teaching writing as imitation of a few "classical" modes, teaching writing as encouraging students to express an essential self, to name three such models--are now pursuing the implications of seeing the *self* as constructed as part of and through culture. In the process, they are looking for ways for students to make use of that perspective in their writing.

It's a tough sell. After a quick read, I didn't see much compslashrhetslashculturalstudies in the CCCC program. The most conspicuous entry along these lines is a critique, "Reading Is Not

Writing," which I think will argue against "reading the culture" insofar as it substitutes for text production. Those of us at 4Cs seem to be otherwise occupied. For a variety of reasons, the field of comp/rhet doesn't open quickly to change. There's a substantial disciplinary and academic and cultural investment in all three of the models I have mentioned. Many writing teachers, along with many of the general public and students, want "English" to be *required* precisely so that non-standard usage can be *made* standard. It doesn't help in such discussions to question the cultural hierarchies that define what counts for standard usage, or to point out that classroom time spent discussing such mortal sins as comma splices and sentence fragments doesn't have much noticeable effect on students' writing. All these observations achieve is to get *us* classified as undisciplined liberals. . . . A quick look at many current textbooks and syllabi will illustrate that older models do persist. Assignments by modes (description, comparison and contrast, classification, etc.) and process-based instruction which assumes a unitary, rational *sum* as the starting-point (without necessarily going back to *cogito*) are both alive and tenacious. There's probably a formula somewhere to derive the half-life of pedagogical models--it must be somewhere around 30 years, at least. Furthermore, with the downsizing of English instruction proceeding apace, a majority of us may not have effective control over the selection of textbooks and teaching approaches. So redefining the agenda of comp/rhet, as Berlin tries to do, into *signifying practices broadly conceived* faces some problems from the get-go, in that writing teachers are not the only parties concerned.

One of these problems is a certain resistance within our field (not to mention resistance from students and the extra-academic culture in general) to *theory-speak*. To state the obvious: Many writing programs have been sold (literally . . .) on the basis of pragmatic results--send us all your students and we'll teach 'em how to communicate clearly and with common sense. But if your

approach to comp/rhet involves students in looking closely at what defines *common sense*, that pedagogy may undercut the advertised claim to offer a *service* to other academic disciplines. *We send you our students to be taught how to write*, they might object, *and you give us "signifying practices"? Broadly conceive* ***this!*** The cultural turn in composition presupposes teachers who are engaged in what we are pleased to call a conversation, featuring the names we drop when we drop names.

But most of us in comp/rhet have gotten our theory at second- or third-hand, for reasons we know all too well. If we were lucky, from graduate school courses taken while teaching and/or working in other, non-academic jobs, and from the occasional Four-Cs or state or regional conference; if not lucky, from workshops, "bright ideas" conferences, colleagues or superiors, required syllabi, or textbooks. While perhaps sympathetic to a cultural turn, we may not be well positioned professionally to *get it*, or to make use of the *it* we *get*.

The cultural turn in composition could not survive without the word *text* (my promised return to the last of these title keywords). Use *text* too often in departmental meetings or on course syllabi, and you may see that it works as a kind of litmus test about theory-speak. *Text* raises hackles on several accounts--those who want prose to sound less social-scientistic, more humanistic (or just human); those who want to see writing as the sincere and intended product of fully informed and conscious agents; those who carry into writing courses associations from the literary side of English studies, who may see student writings as *works manqué* --all bristle at the T-word. My colleague Dr. Wolff started a near-riot in a department meeting a few years ago (since this was the Midwest, "near-riot" is an exaggeration; actually, it was more of a dissatisfied stir in the room) by using that word *text* in a discussion about changing English majors' literature requirements. This discussion would

likely be replicated in the area of comp/rhet--the only reason why literature was on the table for discussion is that those objecting do not have much professional investment in the teaching of writing anyway.

So: if many who are teaching comp/rhet derive a sense of what's current in our field not from journals and NCTE publications so much as from theories given material form in textbooks, it may be useful for understanding the cultural turn in comp/rhet to look at *culture* as represented there. I'm not intending a critique of these textbooks per se--they are good for what they do. Rather, I'm examining the underlying assumptions about culture which inform them. Textbooks can serve as the traces for how comp/rhet is conceived. If a textbook conflicts with instructors' views of comp/rhet (discipline and pedagogy), then it won't be adopted. I raided my bookshelves for a few of these, making no very systematic effort to exhaust the available supply--looking mostly for "readers" which bring together essays on a number of themes. The themes I found most prominent are these (see handout): 1) culture as in *multicultural*--representations of different ethnicities and races, 2) *themes* in thinking about culture, such as "race, class and gender"; 3) the culture as *popular* culture, 4) in opposition to this, high culture, set forth as print culture, 5) "the culture" as device for foregrounding ideology. Textbooks tend not to hold to one of these themes exclusively; rather, their selected readings often present conflicting definitions of culture, providing editorial introductions and notes to frame matters so as to make the definition of culture ambiguous. This ambiguity allows the same book to be adopted by instructors whose understandings of culture and pedagogies conflict with each other.

Under *multicultural*, each culture comes with a label, producing something like a coat of many colors--but the only practical name for the entire coat is *American*. Tables of contents display

the inclusion of African-American, Asian-American, and other hyphenated names. These names or essay titles mark semiotically their status as "other." The universe of discourse here is overwhelmingly *American*--e.g., Schuster and Van Pelt, *Speculations: Readings in Culture, Identity, and Values*, "In addition to the rich diversity of perspectives on American culture in *Speculations*," etc. In my limited sample, I didn't find any texts which noted that *American* is a construction. (An exception to this US focus is Hirschberg, *One World, Many Cultures*, which has at most one or two essays by American writers in each of its nine sections.) Another best categorized as multicultural is *American Mosaic: Multicultural Readings in Context* by Rico and Mano. Its table of contents suggests waves of immigration, with "Early Immigrants" (Italians, Swedes, Jews, Eastern Europeans, but not English, Scottish, Irish, French, or Germans) "Chinese Immigrants," "African-Americans" (passing over the fact that they weren't "immigrating" voluntarily), and others, ending with "American Indians"(as immigrants???) and "The New Immigrants." In this framework, *culture* has been divided down a little bit, but is still treated conceptually as though it were unitary, eliding divisions within these (and are "American Indians" all one group anyway?).

Here I think it's safe to say that these readers do not assume that students necessarily know much about these cultures at the outset; rather, students as implied readers encounter what the last text above calls "the interplay of historical, literary, and cultural concerns" within which they may, if they choose, "assert their own voices." If the instructor's pedagogical approach asks students to write about what they know, these readings would probably create some difficulties. The perspective tends to assume affiliation with "the dominant culture," which is then opened up to allow some voices from the margins.

Themes about culture, such as the familiar but unequal trinity "race, class, and gender," overlap to some extent with multicultural approaches. (As noted above, this overlap is probably a marketing decision, allowing the same book to suit several approaches.) *Speculations* is organized by themes such as "Music and Morality," "Self and Society," and so on. *One World, Many Cultures* subdivides into family, gender, work, class, the state, strangers, etc. George and Trimbur's book *Reading Culture* is also presented through themes, e.g., "Schooling," "Work," "Images," "Storytelling," and so on. I suppose that a thematic organization offers the image of consumer choice among items of equal validity, and serves to make the strange more familiar.

One theme persistent enough to support separate textbooks would be treating culture as *popular* culture, and here one "rhetoric" could be mentioned, Barry Brummett's *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, along with two readers, Maasik and Solomon's *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, and Harris and Rosen, *Media Journal: Reading and Writing about Popular Culture*. (Note that the terms *reading and writing* are often used to signal that these are legit for freshman comp.) To focus on the readers, *Signs of Life* represents popular culture as something that students are already immersed in, and the readings are meant to offer a bridge to academic discourse: "[W]e believe not only that such bridges can be built, but that building them represents our best hope of training a new generation of students in critical thinking and writing." (iii) *Media Journal* takes a less semiotic approach than *Signs of Life*, stressing instead what I take to be more of an expressivist emphasis on journal writing as a device to encourage students both to engage with texts and to become critics rather than consumers: "A critic is concerned with appreciating, understanding, connecting, and talking back to the media. A consumer simply uses the products of the media." (1) To some extent, approaches which emphasize popular culture are treating it as the *other* of high or

academic culture. For example, *Signs of Life* notes that "ours is indeed a culture of the electronic media, centered on the visual image rather than the printed word." That seems paradoxical, coming from a printed text offering few if any visual images; another area of paradox, given the opposition between popular and high culture, is the *we* move, "*ours* is indeed a culture . . ."

Such a division between popular and high / academic / mainstream culture is confirmed from the other side of the divide by Dock, *The Press of Ideas: Readings for Writers on Print Culture and the Information Age*, whose preface asserts that, in spite of images, "printed texts still govern our understanding of the world." An interesting subtext to this collection is passionate involvement with books--quotations to this effect are featured on the table of contents as teasers, e.g. Sven Birkerts, "The reading I did in late boyhood and early adolescence was passionate and private, carried on at high heat. When I went to my room and opened a book, it was to seal myself off as fully as possible in another place." In other words, rather than taking the popular and bringing it into the sphere of *critical* reading, as with *Signs of Life* and *Media Journal*, this approach would take an activity identified with academic work, "print culture," and make that the site of "passionate" engagement in a mode more customary to some elements of popular culture. This strikes me as interesting material for a postmodern reading. Both textbook moves take a clearly delineated difference and assert a fundamental similarity, along lines of what slashes do in asserting identity and difference simultaneously. What we might discover if we began to take seriously the project of reading rhetoric in the academy and rhetoric in media is that our carefully guarded differences, like the borders of Disneyland in Jean Baudrillard's famous formulation, are fictional constructions necessary to disguise the fact that Disneyland is everywhere.

The fifth category I'm exploring in culture-related textbooks runs through several of the other categories. The term *culture* (in opposition with *nature*) is often used as a device for foregrounding ideology. This is most closely associated with the importation of cultural studies into comp/rhet, and is present as a subtext in most of the texts I looked at. *Reading Culture*, for example, defines culture as "a way of life that organizes social experience and shapes the identities of individuals and groups," useful "to talk about how people make sense of their worlds and about the values, beliefs, and practices in which they invest their energies and allegiances." They don't confront student readers at this point with the theory-speak terms *ideology* and *hegemony*, but clearly that's what's on the table, among other things. Bizzell and Herzberg's *Negotiating Difference* (probably not a freshman text) is organized around "contact zones" which present areas of ideological conflict: "First Contacts Between Puritans and Native Americans," "The Debate Over Slavery and the Declaration of Independence," "Defining 'Woman's Sphere' in Nineteenth-Century American Society," and so on. These "case studies" are offered as illustrations of past contacts, the intent of some of which was "to change the way America was imagined so that it would include those who were newer or less powerful or spoken about but not listened to--in short, to negotiate the differences of culture, race, gender, class, and ideology." (v)

So far my paper has focused on some implications of "the cultural turn" in comp/rhet. I want to conclude by presenting three questions for discussion, later today or elsewhere:

1) How much of our instruction in comp/rhet is or should be in "reading the culture," as opposed to other aspects of that discipline or practice--learning to participate in academic discourse, developing good writing practices, adapting language to particular audiences and purposes? Does "reading the culture" supplant or redefine these?

In many of our programs, attention to rhetoric in use doesn't happen anywhere else, at least until the junior level, so there's a large temptation to introduce culture-based topics in freshman comp, just as has occurred in the past with quasi-literary topics.

2) This point was raised by Susan Miller in a recent *JAC* note: does instructional time given to semiotics or other devices drawn from cultural studies (etc.) detract from that available for students to *write*? That is, do we risk making our writing courses into yet more reading courses, in which students are *receiving* rather than *making* knowledge? Do they have to write before they are able to critique?

My own take on this is that there must be some reading and some writing in any classroom situation we could envision, whether explicitly or implicitly concerned with culture. So long as these do not become imbalanced, there's not much difference between culture-based courses and other classroom use of readings. I like to think that any course of study presents some aspect of the culture writ large, and an opportunity for students to write, talk, and think their way into a relation with that aspect. Presenting students with some articulated theories is potentially an empowering move.

3) Can we get away from assuming students to be blank slates? They are already fully functioning members of their own cultures, and a description and articulation of principles by which those work is I think a necessary starting point for any culture-based writing course that will have a lasting effect.

It's in this sense that I would say that students always bring their texts with them to class. I don't mean that they bring the books that we require them to buy, but that they bring an implicit knowledge of culture, out of which they write. That implicit knowledge of culture is the horizon within which they write and think, the boundary of the terrain we encourage them to explore. Keeping

in mind the need for students to write their way into the sort of discourses they need for success in college and after, we should encourage them to look seriously at the text which is their experience and understanding of culture, here and in our classrooms and curricular studies. Only out of such an examination will we and they get to any "other" rhetoric.